Strengthening Your Team's Capacity

Why go this route?

- Because plans hastily thrown together by a group that's not really a team often do not reflect a Learning Community's real perceptions or intentions.

- Because an effective team needs to live with and vigorously examine the results of a plan over time.

- Because a team that "owns" a strong plan can ensure that service providers and professional development resource people—however well intentioned—do not distract from or contradict the Learning Community's direction.

- Because even collaboratively written plans are useless unless they're implemented and monitored for alteration as needed, and your team will need staying power to do that.

You'll know you've arrived when...

- Members understand what "stages" of team dynamics they're experiencing.

- Members know each other's temperaments and styles, and how to honor their differences.

- Members are clear about helpful roles they can offer the group.

- Members share an understanding of decision-making options and the circumstances in which each is most helpful.

- Members share a model for giving each other constructive feedback and have practiced using it together.

Construction Zone

We originally designed this to help School Improvement Teams which discovered (perhaps through MI-Plan's "readiness" assessment) that they needed more coherence as a team before they started making decisions together. But readers suggested (and we agree) that any team could benefit from these exercises and activities.

It's about TIME

- One option is to plan a 20-30 minute segment to lead off each meeting in which you build capacity by using one of these exercises.

- Another is to factor in time at the beginning of a team's formation to build capacity. A half-day's worth of activities may be enough to get the team started.

Potential COSTS

- Minimal funds required. The "temperament" work in Step 2 can be deepened with use of a facilitator as a resource person.

- A weekend or summer retreat to explore these issues and get a jump start on a plan could involve off-site accomodations, consultant fees and participant stipends, if chosen as a "higher-end" way to do this work.

The Process

A step-by-step guide to strengthening a team's capacity

NOTE: Steps marked with a ● are accompanied by one or more inserts, included in this packet.

1 **Discuss together the "stages" to expect** as your team moves from mere names on a list to a fully functioning high-performance team.

See INSERT A for Step 1 to self-assess where on the continuum your team is currently. Use INSERT B for Step 1 to discuss the tasks to focus on at your stage.

2 **Get acquainted with each other.** Working together is broader than just tasks and decisions… and deeper than just social chat. Exchange information about your styles and preferences that will help you understand each other when you differ.

Packet 5:1 *"Knowing Yourself as an Educator,"* suggests some tools and resources for describing your "temperament." Offer group members a chance to use one of the instruments to describe their preferences and styles, and assemble a picture of your temperaments as a group—Which ones are strongly represented? Which kinds of thinking are missing? How will you compensate for what is lacking? What might you miss if you aren't careful?

3 **Identify roles members can play** on behalf of the group.

INSERT for Step 3 is an inventory of roles needed by a well-oiled group. Use it to have individuals identify one or two gifts they think they could bring to your group dynamics, and see what gaps are likely to develop. This could help some members notice that it would help the group if they'd shift to a role they are capable of, but less likely to think about. Alternatively, ask one member to use the inventory to observe group process during a meeting, noting who fills each role. The observer can thank those who did… and note needs not yet filled.

4 **Agree on a range of decision-making options.** If you have discussed as a team when to use which kind, it will be easier in the heat of a discussion for someone to refer back to this framework.

INSERTS A and B for Step 4 offer a model, with a tool for figuring out which kind of decision is recommended in a given situation. Brainstorm as a team 5 or 6 decisions you can imagine yourselves needing to make over the course of your work. Work in pairs to locate each of the decisions on the grid, and explain your thinking to the full group. You will not all agree (in part because it's easy to imagine a situation and a decision differently with so little information) but listen to each other's reasoning. Try to see together the pro's and con's of using different options.

5 **Practice as a group giving constructive feedback** to each other. If you learn a shared model now, it will come in handy when you are in the heat of disagreement later.

INSERT for Step 5 offers an easy-to-remember guide. Have group members think of a time when they had something hard to say to someone NOT in the group. Working in pairs, use the guide to phrase what is needed to be said. The listener gives the speaker feedback about his/her framing of the issue (use the format too—it works for both compliments and critiques).

6 **Check your comfort levels about data.** Work to build your capacity as a group to trust and use data if it's not familiar territory.

See MI-Map Packet 4:1 *Whetting Your School's Appetite for Data* and other packets in that tab for help getting started. Data use is SO fundamental to good planning (especially when working in the spotlight, under pressure), and your team needs this skill.

Getting more mileage from strengthening team capacity

How working toward stronger teams benefits

your school in regard to the following initiatives:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

- Heightened expectations in this far-reaching legislation put increasing pressure on School Improvement Teams, requiring deeper conversation about harder choices. Getting significant buy-in from the team and staff will be made more possible if the team has deep capacity to work together.

Education YES!

- Understanding and communication to staff about the school's status (both EducationYes! report card and AYP status) will be critical. Strong teams that agree where they're going and "own" their plan will be essential to maintaining hope and confidence. These kinds of strengthening strategies will help build those strong teams.

MI-Plan

- This web-based planning template (like the North Central accreditation model it incorporates) relies heavily on data collection, analysis and use to select goals, interventions, assessments, and professional development choices. Assessing readiness to benefit from School Improvement is the first major section of MI-Plan.

Resources

Books

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In
Roger Fisher and William Ury.
New York: Viking Press, 1991.

This common sense approach to seeking shared interests underlying differing positions has been helpful to contract negotiating teams. It also can be helpful in resolving principled stands about strategy choices.

The Team Handbook
Peter Scholtes, et al editors.
Oriel Inc. (formerly Joiner Associates).
Madison, WI. 1996. 800/669-08326.

Full of practical tips, engaging graphics and the "voice of experience," this spiral-bound handbook is just that—a reference source you'll want to keep handy while engaged in the care and feeding of a strong team.

People

Specialists

Most Intermediate School Districts have a specialist working with schools on School Improvement in their service areas.

Coaches

The *Alliance for Building Capacity in Schools* website lists coaches whose training has been provided by Michigan State University and supported by the Michigan Department of Education. Some are experienced in school improvement implementation in Michigan schools. Please visit:

www.abcscoaches.org

Primary Author for this MI-Map Packet

Henry Cade
Partner Educator
Office of School Improvement

MI-Map Coordinator/Editor

Joann Neuroth
Changing Horses
neurothj@aol.com

For more information, contact

Office of School Improvement
Michigan Department of Education
517/241-4285

MICHIGAN
Education Department of
Office of School Improvement

www.michigan.gov/mde